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AUTHOR Howe, Nina
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ABSTRACT

Two separate studies suggest that the development of positive sibling relations may be related to siblings' social-cognitive skills (Stewart & Marvin, 1984) and the nature of mothers' conversations with their children (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982). The purpose of the present study was to provide a synthesis of these two studies and to demonstrate the patterns of their interrelationships. Thirty-two sibling pairs (with siblings aged 14 months and 3-4 years) and their mothers were observed for the quality of the sibling relationship and references by mothers or children to the baby's feelings and thoughts; the older child's caregiving and perspective-taking skills were also measured. Mother references to the child about feelings were associated with child references to the mother, thus supporting Dunn and Kendrick. Child references to the baby, but not mother-child references to each other, were associated with a positive sibling relationship. An association between preschooler's skill at adopting another's perspective and caretaking of the distressed infant (Stewart & Marvin, 1984) was not replicated. However, a positive association was found between caretaking and the baby's distress. Child references to the baby about feelings and thoughts, rather than mother-child references to each other about the baby, were associated with positive sibling behaviors in the Strange Situation and perspective-taking. Results are discussed within a family systems framework. Consideration of the baby's role in defining the nature of family relationships is presented. (Author/PCB)

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SOCIALIZATION, SOCIAL COGNITIVE FACTORS AND THE SIBLING RELATIONSHIP

Nina Howe
Dept. of Education
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve West
Montreal, Quebec, H3G 1M8
Canada

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ABSTRACT

Two separate studies suggest that the development of positive sibling relations may be related to perspective-taking skills (Stewart & Marvin, 1984) and mother's conversations with their children (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982). The purpose of the present study was to provide a synthesis of these two studies and to demonstrate the patterns of the interrelationships. Thirty-two sibling pairs (14 months and 3-4 years) and their mothers were observed for the quality of the sibling relationship and references to feelings and thoughts; the older child's caregiving and perspective-taking skills were also measured. Mother references to the child about feelings were associated with child references to the mother, thus supporting Dunn and Kendrick. Child references to the baby, but not mother-child references to each other, were associated with a positive sibling relationship. The predicted association between preschooler's perspective-taking skill and caretaking of the distressed infant (Stewart & Marvin, 1984) was not replicated, however, a positive association was found between caretaking and the baby's distress. Child references to the baby about feelings and thoughts, rather than mother-child references to each other about the baby, were associated with positive sibling behaviors in the Strange Situation and perspective-taking. Frequent mother-child-baby interaction was associated with a poorer sibling relationship. Results are discussed within a family systems framework and a case for the baby's role in defining the nature of family relationships is presented.

INTRODUCTION

Two separate studies suggest that the development of positive sibling relations may be related to social-cognitive skills and mother's conversations with their children. In one study, Stewart and Marvin (1984) found that preschool-aged children who were able to adopt the perspective of another comforted their distressed younger siblings when mothers left the two children alone in a laboratory playroom. In a second study, Dunn and Kendrick (1982) reported a positive association between mothers who discussed a newborn second child as a person with feelings and needs and additionally encouraged the first-born to care for the infant with the development of a positive sibling relationship 14 months later. The first study was interpreted in terms of the effect of cognitive abilities on social relations; the second in terms of the influence a mother might exert on the child's understanding of the infant's experience. The purpose of the present study was to provide a synthesis of the two sets of findings and to identify the patterns of their interrelationships. More specifically, the present study was designed to examine the relations among the ability of preschool-aged children to provide caretaking for their younger siblings, to take the perspective of another, the quality of sibling relationship and mother-child conversational style.

METHOD

Data were collected on thirty-two sibling pairs (aged 14 months and 3-4 years) and their mothers. During the two 40-minute home observations, three measures were collected:

1.) Quality of Sibling Relationships: positive (e.g., laugh, smile), negative (e.g., hit) behaviors directed by each sibling to the other and child-baby joint play and attention were measured using a modification of the Dunn and Kendrick (1982) scale.

2.) Mother-Child References aboout the Baby's Feelings and Thoughts: Ongoing conversations were taped and the transcripts were coded for references about the baby's feelings and thoughts directed by mother and child to each other and by the child to the baby.

3.) Mother-Child-Baby Interaction: Maternal interactions during play and attention with either sibling were coded.

During a session at the University of Waterloo Infant Laboratory, the following measures were collected:

1.) Caretaking: The older child's ability to provide caretaking for his/her younger sibling was measured during a modified Strange Situation (Stewart & Marvin, 1984).

2.) Perspective-taking: Three measures were administered to the preschoolers: a.) Syllogisms, a logical reasoning task, and b.) the Secret Game, where the child had to take another's perspective in order to play correctly (both from Stewart & Marvin, 1984) and c.) the Bear Game, which tapped the child's

Method (continued)

perceptual, affective and cognitive perspective-taking skills (Abrahams, 1979). Scores on these three tasks were combined to produce one score for perspective-taking.

FINDINGS

Mother references to the child about the baby's feelings and thoughts were associated with child references to the mother (r = .72, $p < .05$), thus supporting Dunn and Kendrick's work. While the predicted association between mother-child references to the baby's feelings and thoughts and a positive sibling relationship was not supported, child references to the baby were strongly associated with a positive sibling relationship (see Table 1). Thus the more interactive sibling relationships were characterized by the older child's discussion of feelings and thoughts with the infant. Maternal interaction with each sibling during play or joint attention activities (e.g., reading books) was associated with a poorer sibling relationship (Table 2); the differential pattern of interaction with each sibling may suggest that mothers geared the activity to the level of the particular partner. The Stewart and Marvin finding of an association between the preschooler's perspective-taking skill and providing caretaking for a distresed younger sibling was not replicated in the present study; however, a positive association was found between caretaking and the baby's distress (r= .49, $p < .05$). Thus, it was the baby's distress rather than the child's perspective-taking skill that was associated with caretaking. Mother-child references about feelings and thoughts were not associated with either caretaking or perspective-taking as had been predicted; however, the child references to the baby were associated with other positive sibling behaviors in the Strange Situation and with perspective-taking

Findings (continued)

(Table 2). The friendly behaviors the siblings directed to one another in the home and in the Strange Situation were associated (Table 2). The negative associations between the baby's home behavior and the Strange Situation are rather intriguing and may suggest that the baby has a role in defining the nature of family relationships. A model of sibling-mother relations based on the findings is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1

	Sibling-Directed Behaviors					
	C Pos	B Pos	C Neg	B Neg	C-B Play	C-B Attention
References to Thoughts and Feelings						
M to C about B	-.06	-.13	.05	.04	.02	-.43*
C to M about B	-.06	-.03	.32**	.07	.10	-.38*
C to B	.50*	.54*	.33**	.40*	.49*	.03
Mother-Child-Baby Interactions						
M Attention C	-.31**	-.35	.02	-.19	-.34*	-.45*
M Attention B	-.01	-.08	-.14	-.28	.05	-.34*
M Play C	-.17	-.11	.01	-.16	-.15	-.46*
M Play B	-.48*	-.50*	-.12	-.39*	-.32**	-.43*

* $p < .05$, two-tailed

** $p < .10$, two-tailed

M = Mother C = Child B = Baby

Pos = Positive Neg = Negative

Table 2

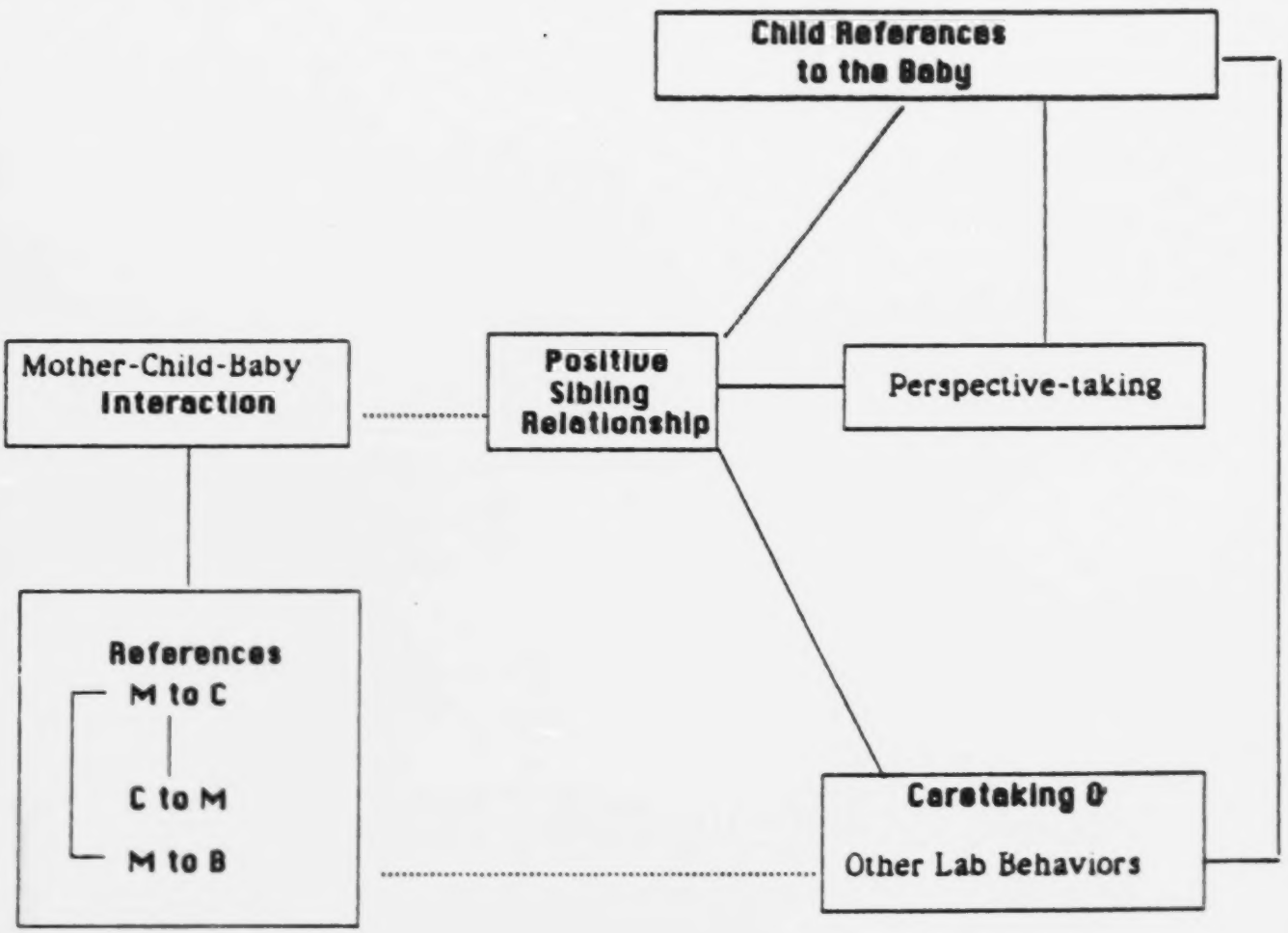
	Strange Siuation Behaviors			
	Perspective-Taking	Child Caretaking	Child Total (Positive & Caretaking)	Baby Positive
Home Behaviors: References to Thoughts and Feelings				
M to C about B	-.01	-.09	-.28	-.19
C to M about B	-.05	-.01	-.18	-.06
C to B	.33**	.18	.34*	.39*
Sibling-Directed Behaviors				
C Positive	.36*	.25	.39*	.25
B Positive	.27	.21	.21	.20
C Negative	-.23	.21	.16	.20
B Negative	.02	.52*	.47*	.37*
C - B Play	.29**	-.04	.03	-.04
C - B Attention	-.08	-.11	.13	-.05

* $p < .05$, two-tailed

** $p < .10$, two-tailed

Figure 1

A Model of Sibling - Mother Relations



..... Negative Correlation

____ Positive Correlation

M = Mother C = Child B = Baby

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